

In the News – *A Home for Independence*

"A Home for Independence"

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by Shelley Croes, Free Press Staff Writer

Le Center -- Steve Johnson has a way of finding the silver lining in a dark cloud.

The Le Center man has been rebuilding his life after an accident left him with permanent disabilities. After spending six years in a nursing home, he's making plans to move into a specially designed house that will allow him to live on his own.

"I'm the luckiest quadriplegic I know," he said. Nestled on Le Center's outskirts with a picturesque view of the countryside, the house was a logical progression in what Johnson describes as his "rebirth" since a devastating accident seven years ago.

"It's involved a lot of mental growth. I was reborn. There was no life as I knew it. I had to relearn everything."

Johnson, 47, moved to Le Center in 1985. He was planning to get married and, in a boost to his career, became a partner in a local construction firm.

In 1987, everything changed.

Johnson was working on a bridge project, operating a mobile crane when a strong wind gust caught it and toppled it to the ground. The top of the cab pinned him across the neck. He never lost consciousness during the 45 minutes it took rescue workers to free him from the machine. After nine months in the hospital and two operations, Johnson moved into the nursing home in Le Center. He is paralyzed from the chest down, although he has use of his arms and limited use of his hands. The accident also brought on a spate of health problems.

"It's unfortunate, but it was an act of God," he said. "Mentally, I had to come to grips with the fact that I couldn't live alone."

Johnson's condition stabilized, and he learned how to do things for himself. But he had to deal with the emotional wounds as well: His mother had trouble accepting his disabilities, old friends drifted away; his plans to marry fell apart.

"When you get hurt like this, a lot of your friends from before drift away, and you make new friends who didn't know you before. It's hard for some people to accept the change."

Although Johnson always found his way around town in his wheelchair, buying a specially equipped van gave him true mobility. Living on his own was the next step.

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He wanted to stay in Le Center because the medical community is familiar with his health-care needs and he can wheel his chair up and down the streets without fear.

Johnson saved up his workers' compensation and got in touch with Accessibility Designs, a company he heard about from his sister. Working with Johnson's budget and needs, the company designed a new home based upon four principles:

It had to be safe, accessible, handsome, and easy for him to maintain.

"A lot of my battle was finding products that would work and manipulating products to make them work in the house," said Jane Hampton, the company's founder.

"As awareness builds, we'll be doing a lot more houses like this," she said. "We'll see the cost of the products come down as people age and the demand increases."

The house has special features but was also designed with resale in mind. It's larger than what Johnson needs, and some of the special features can be "undone."

As baby-boomers age, they'll want to live independently as long as possible. They'll need modified homes to cope with the effects of aging, such as visual problems, weaker backs, limited mobility, and arthritis, Hampton said.

Johnson is moving into the house this month, and he's inviting the public to an open house Nov. 5 and 6. For Johnson, opening his house to the public is a chance to educate: He wants people to see and learn.

"I'm not as concerned that people in my condition see the house, but that able-bodied people see it."

Johnson has decided to have a health-care worker stay with him part-time until he adjusts to the change.

"It still scares me; it's going to be trial and error."

But Johnson has grown accustomed to trial and error. Since the accident, day-to-day living involves taking chances, sometimes resulting in failure and sometimes in success. Regardless of the result, he said, he's not looking for someone to blame.

"I can't say God allowed this to happen. He's taken care of me ever since. I may not have everything I want, but I've got what I need."

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The open house will be 10:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m. Nov. 5 to 6. The address is 745 E. Meadow View Lane, Le Center.

House Designed with Wheelchair in Mind

The Free Press

Steve Johnson's house, designed by Accessibility Design, a Twin Cities company, and built by Wargelin Homes, has special features to accommodate his disabilities.

Here's a look at some of those features:

All the doors and hallways are wider, thresholds have been lowered, and the basement will have a low-pile carpet for the wheelchair. Upstairs, the floor will be a vinyl material that looks like wood. It's less expensive and easier to keep clean.

The garage is temperature-controlled because Johnson is susceptible to extreme temperatures. It's extra large to allow room for the lift in his van and for Johnson to maneuver his wheelchair.

Electric outlets have been raised, but the light switches are at standard height at Johnson's request. The windows open and close with a bar that's easier for Johnson to manipulate. They open and turn around so both sides can be cleaned from the inside.

The kitchen has cabinets with wheels that can be pulled out from under the counter and moved if Johnson wants to push his wheelchair under the counter. The higher cabinets will have a remote that electronically lowers the shelves.

There's a virtually unnoticeable lift system that will bring him and his wheelchair from the upstairs into the basement.

Most striking are Johnson's bedroom and bathroom. On the ceiling over Johnson's bed is a track system that leads to the attached bathroom. Johnson can push a remote, which drops a lift system to the bed.

He attaches himself to the lift, and with the push of a button, he'll be carried into the bathroom and put on the toilet, tub, or shower. With another push of the button, he's returned to the bed. The bedroom also has an escape door in case of an emergency.

The house is aesthetically pleasing, with two decks, a remote-controlled gas fireplace, lots of windows and cabinetry.